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ABSTRACT

During the 1920s professional baseball emerged as both a mass sport and a mass media-reported sport. This emergence was accompanied by evolution and change in both radio broadcasting and newspaper sports writing. Live coverage of sporting events, particularly baseball's World Series, provided a part of radio's growth process that affected the fledgling medium's development. Essentially, radio, when confronted with the decision of imitating the reporting styles of newspapers, opted for an entertainment rather than a newsreporting point-of-view. One of the first baseball announcers was Graham McNamee, whose background was in entertainment. Radio provided an immediate description of the game, while newspapers provided a delayed but more concise summary. Sports were a popular feature of newspapers in the 1920s also, and newspaper circulation and advertising revenues increased during this period. Sports writers tended to write lengthy commentaries with literary allusions. They are represented by Grantland Rice who wrote in the early part of the decade using a "Gee Whiz" or praise approach and W.O. McGeehan who wrote later in the decade using a more realistic and objective approach, termed "Aw Nuts." (MKM)

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"GEE WHIZ!" AND "AW NUTS!": RADIO AND NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF BASEBALL IN THE 1920's

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"GEE WHIZ!" AND "AW NUTS!": RADIO AND NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF BASEBALL IN THE 1920's

During the 1920's, professional baseball emerged as both a mass sport and a mass media-reported sport. This emergence was accompanied by evolution and change in both radio broadcasting and newspaper sports writing. During this period, radio moved away from its technological infancy and established itself as a viable mass medium. Live coverage of sporting events, particularly baseball's World Series, provided a part of radio's growth process that affected the fledgling medium's development. This advent of athletic coverage forged closer ties between radio broadcasters and newspaper sportswriters than might be expected from the configuration of mass media that we know today. Essentially, radio, when confronted with the decision of imitating the reporting styles of newspapers, opted for an entertainment rather than a newsreporting point-of-view. The origins of this decision, and its relation to changes within the newspaper industry itself, provide a useful background for examining the notion of how newer media build upon the practices of the older media. Although baseball coverage cannot tell the complete story of the evolution of radio sportscasting, or of radio in general, the evolution of this particular subset of broadcast reporting does provide a persuasive example of how newer media adapt to their surroundings, and how both older and newer media are enriched by their mutual contact.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF BASEBALL

If, as Paul Gallico of the New York News has suggested,[1] the 1920's constituted the Golden Age of Sports, then the sport of baseball during that period provided a good deal of high grade material. Heroes like Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, and Walter Johnson performed their feats within the confines of major league ballparks, yet their heroics were proclaimed widely in the media of the period.[2]

The exact cause of the Golden Age of Baseball is difficult to ascertain. The economically oriented might look at the spectacular rise in baseball attendance during the 1920's -- until the Depression, attendance grew more rapidly than did population[3] -- and conclude that rising revenues meant more opportunity for talent to be attracted to the game. The sociologically oriented might point to the burst of leisure orientation that followed the First World War,[4] and conclude that society had opened broader avenues for athletic talent to emerge. But perhaps the most plausible explanation lies with changes that were made within the game itself.

Three changes -- the abolition of the spitball[5] in 1920; the change in the kind of yarn used to manufacture baseballs,[6] also in 1920; and, the adoption of the cushioned cork center baseball[7]

in 1926 -- may have contributed more to the Golden Age of Baseball than all of the socioeconomics combined.[8] Until 1920, pitchers were permitted to perform all sorts of depravities upon the baseball -- ranging from application of human spittle to use of a ghastly substance called slippery elm. These foreign substances permitted the baseball to perform unearthly motions, depriving batters of easy targets to hit. In a fit of sanitation (and possibly to liven up the game instead of the ball), the baseball elders declared the spitball and its brethern anathema and banned them from the game. This ban, combined with a newfound propensity for using greater numbers of brand new baseballs during a game, took some of the advantage away from the pitchers and gave it to the batters.[9]

Given a better chance at actually hitting the ball, a batter's chances were also improved once he actually made contact. In 1920, Austrailian yarn replaced American yarn in the manufacture of baseballs.[10] Since Austrailian yarn was stouter than American yarn, the insides of a baseball (which were basically a ball of tightly wound yarn) could be wound even tighter, creating a more resilient baseball. This resiliency was improved even further in 1926, with the introduction of the cushioned cork center (actual cork, covered with rubber) around which the Austrailian yarn was wound.[11] The increased resiliency added more bounce to the base-

ball, and the bounce added more distance to the well-hit baseball. The result was the transformation of baseball from a hard-running form of right-angled cricket to the lively skeet shoot of the Jazz Age.

The effects of the rule changes were immediately apparent. In 1915, major league batters managed 384 home runs; by 1920, the total climbed to 631 home runs; the total soared to 1167 home runs by 1925, and reached a generous 1565 home runs for the 1930 season.[12] The 1920's saw baseball burst the confines of its ballparks and become a game of soaring baseballs and statistics.

The poetic praises of 1920's baseball poured forth from two main sources: the press and the radio. Reflecting back on the era, Paul Gallico of the New York News referred to his fellow sportswriters as the men who "... wielded golden pens."[13] These men, Grantland Rice and W.O. McGeehan among them, provided the 1920's with an outpouring of sports prose that at least Gallico felt was the best writing for American newspapers in that period.[14] Even though later critics, such as Stanley Woodward of the New York Herald Tribune, attacked the floridity and factual oversights of the Men with the Golden Pens; nevertheless, even these critics were forced to admit that the fluency of the Golden Pens helped to develop a solid public interest in the sport of baseball.[15]

This written fluency was matched by the spoken fluency of

the toy that became a national obsession in the 1920's: the radio. The spectacular growth of radio during the 1920's is easily chronicled. From a base of about 400,000 sets in 1922, radio ownership rose to about 4 million sets in 1925, then more than tripled by 1930 to over 13 million sets.[16] Among the sounds that poured forth from these millions of radios were the sounds of baseball.

Baseball was considered a natural topic for broadcasting: unofficially, it was the national pastime; it was understood by large numbers of the potential listening audience; and its activities were easily explained over the radio.[17] In 1922, a network of radio stations -- WJZ (Newark, New Jersey), WGY (Schnectady, New York), and WBZ (Springfield, Massachusetts) -- carried Grantland Rice's live play-by-play description of the World Series to an estimated audience of five million listeners.[18] A year later, WEAF (New York, New York) connected much of the Eastern Seaboard to hear a fledgling announcer named Graham McNamee describe the 1923 Battle of Broadway between the New York Yankees and the New York Giants.[19]

Operating on the assumption that silence in a radio broadcast was undesirable,[20] glib radio announcers used fertile imaginations and vivid vocabularies to make a lively game even more exciting. Baseball Historian David Voigt felt that the eloquence

of these announcers created an imaginary world for radio listeners[21] -- a world of heroic deeds circumscribed only by imagination and the unyielding geometry of baseball. The Men with the Golden Pens were matched by the Men with the Golden Microphones.

Yet the two media -- print and radio -- did not form a battleground; rather, they provided two complementary factors in the Golden Age of Baseball. Historian David Voigt explained that baseball in the 1920's had three interrelated dimensions.[22] The first dimension was attendance. As was mentioned earlier, attendance rose sharply in the 1920's; and, Voigt concluded, at the minimum, radio did not hurt live attendance.[23] Nor did radio appear to hurt the second dimension, newspaper sales:[24] newspaper circulation rose from about 28 million in 1920 to about 34 million in 1925, and, by 1930, had climbed steadily to over 39½ million.[25] Voigt concluded that radio actually stimulated sales as radio listeners bought newspapers to follow game statistics.[26]

This complementarity was not difficult to understand. Baseball benefitted from its exposure in both media, and the media seem to have benefitted through profits related their differing mechanical abilities to cover the games. As Stanley Woodward pointed out, radio coverage of a baseball game involved virtually nonstop talking for two and a half hours, and would involve an estimated 22,500 words.[27] A solid newspaper account, however,

would run a mere 500 words.[28] From these simple numbers alone, the difference between the two media was apparent: radio provided an immediate but not necessarily coherent description of the game, while newspapers provided a delayed, but concise, summary of the festivities.

Indeed, the press and the radio did not seem to feel overly competitive until the 1930's.[29] If the proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) can be taken as a barometer, then newspapers were not overly sensitive to the competitive aspect of radio until 1930, and general concern was tempered by the habit of some newspapers of buying radio stations rather than competing with them.[30] In fact, in 1928, the ASNE's proceedings had high praise for radio as a means of selling newspapers, especially extra editions related to sporting events.[31] If major competition existed between the press and the radio in the 1920's over baseball coverage, that competition was in terms of style.

RADIO EMERGES

In 1920, radio station KDKA (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) broadcast Presidential election returns to nearby listeners and ushered in the age of formal radio broadcasting.[32] By Summer, 1921, KDKA was regularly making baseball scores available to its listeners. KDKA's system was simple: a staff member stationed in the

last row of bleachers in Pittsburgh's Forbes Field would write each inning's results on a piece of paper and drop the paper into the street outside the ballpark. The message would be picked up by an accomplice who would run to the nearest phone and call the results to a studio announcer.[33] The system was inexpensive, but vulnerable to gusty winds.

By Fall of 1921, score reporting systems still relied on telephone relays, but were less vulnerable to gusts of wind. From a box seat in New York's Polo Grounds, Sandy Hunt, sports editor of the New York Sunday Call, telephoned a play-by-play description of the Giants-Yankees World Series to announcer Tommy Cowan at radio station WJZ (Newark, New Jersey).[34] Cowan then repeated the information into a microphone, where it was broadcast over the air, and carried by wire to KDKA (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania).[35]

In 1922, the middleman was eliminated, and WJZ (Newark, New Jersey), WGY (Schenectady, New York), and WBZ (Springfield, Massachusetts) were linked to carry a play-by-play description of the World Series by Grantland Rice, then a sports editor with the New York Tribune.[36] This broadcast was remarkable not only for its live coverage of the Second Battle of Broadway between the New York Giants and the New York Yankees; it was also remarkable for the sales promotion campaign that accompanied the coverage.

RCA-Westinghouse, who owned station WJZ as well as a radio

manufacturing operation, bought newspaper advertisements which announced WJZ's coverage of the World Series; proffered RCA radio sets for as low as $25; and offered a "Radiola Score Sheet"[37] for following the games. Coverage of the World Series had moved from a way to experiment with radio to a way to sell radio to a sports-minded public.

But the WJZ-based network was troubled from the start. American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) -- the parent company of WJZ's chief competitor, WEAF (New York, New York) -- declined to lease telephone lines to WJZ, WBZ, and WGY for their World Series network.[38] Consequently, the stations were forced to use telegraph lines which were not designed for voice transmission: the result was an inferior voice product with a decided background hum.[39] Further, the announcer chosen for the play-by-play description, Grantland Rice, complained that he lost money by broadcasting the games: the demands of describing the game as it was happening made the experience too transient. Rice did not have enough time to gather the impressions necessary for the profitable magazine and syndicated articles which he had contracted to write.[40] At best, the first real stab at World Series broadcasting was a mixed success.

By 1923, however, radio coverage passed from promotional gimmick to radio event. On October 10, a simple charge was

inserted into the programming log of radio station WEAF (New York, New York): "1:30 - World Series, play by play."[44]

The third Battle of Broadway between the Giants and the Yankees was covered by a telephone line network leased to WEAF (New York, New York) by its parent company, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T). To provide live, play-by-play coverage of the games, WEAF chose two announcers: W.O. McGeehan, sports columist with the New York Tribune, for his expertise in baseball; and Graham McNamee, a staff announcer at WEAF, for his expertise behind a microphone. McNamee's experience proved more valuable, and by the fourth inning of the third game, McNamee was the voice of the World Series.[42] From 1923-1927,[43] McNamee proved to be the Babe Ruth of baseball broadcast announcers: his popularity peaked in 1925 when he received 50,000 pieces of fan mail for his World Series broadcasts.[44]

Born during 1888 in Washington, D.C., McNamee travelled to New York City after a childhood of piano and singing lessons in the Pacific Northwest, to make his professional debut as a baritone singer in New York's Aeolian Hall.[45] This 1921 debut was followed by a series of recital engagements for McNamee, and by an especially favorable review of his rendition of Handel's "O Ruddier than the Cherry."[46] Despite these modest successes, McNamee's career as a singer failed to flourish, but, in May, 1923,

McNamee received the break that launched his radio career.

Skipping lunch while on jury duty, McNamee slipped into the AT&T building for a tour of the new radio studios of WEAF (New York, New York). While there, McNamee was noticed and hired by WEAF's program manager, Samuel L. Ross, who happened to be looking for an announcer,[47] and who was pleased by the quality of McNamee's rich baritone voice.[48] After some experience with studio announcing, McNamee was assigned to cover a New York City middleweight boxing match in August, 1923. Speaking extemporaneously, McNamee kept talking in an authoritative baritone, whether anything was happening or not.[49] Apparently McNamee was considered effective: in October, WEAF assigned him a a backup announcer for the 1923 World Series. When the principal announcer faded, McNamee took command and provided the necessary coverage.[50] The fledgling WEAF announcer was not a baseball expert, but he was a glib speaker; his descriptions played upon the imaginations of his listeners and aided them in re-creating the games that were unfolding before him.[51]

In terms of background, McNamee was primarily a singer, with a smattering of knowledge in culture and sports;[52] and he regarded radio as a medium of entertainment.[53] As an entertainer, not a newsman, McNamee's speech went to the pagentry, not the substance, of the event. Noting a lack of interest in the technicalities

of the game of baseball, both on the part of McNamee and of his audience, radio historians of that period analyzed the masterful way in which McNamee developed and projected the emotion of the game. Performing much like a stage actor, McNamee would pitch his voice at the level of excitement in the game -- becoming excited and speeding his voice at moments of tension, then subsiding into a calm voice when the play slackened -- all the while speaking in the popular idiom, as if he were the average fan incarnate.[54]

But emotion was not the only key to McNamee's successful style. Baseball was often a game of pauses, slack time fraught with anticipation, but within which time very little actually happened. To fill these slack times, McNamee began to use the technique of detailed reporting.[55] By filling the slack time with general description -- little details, such as gloves being dusted off, mud being knocked from spikes, pitchers loosening their arms on the sidelines -- McNamee attempted to create an atmosphere of drama, an atmosphere that would make the fan feel as if he or she were also in the ballpark.[56] In essence, McNamee began using the literary devices of rhythm and detail to turn the event reporting of a baseball game into the high drama of a mythic contest.

In McNamee's autobiography, he described a high point in the

1923 World Series with the rhythm and detail that characterized his broadcasts:

> If the roar had been deafening before, it would have been drowned out, could it have been matched with the one that now followed, as a thick-set figure swinging a bat advanced to the plate. If ever the stage was set for a hero's entrance, it was then. For here was the most advertised athlete in the game, one whose name appears in headlines more often than the President's, Babe Ruth at bat -- with the bases full. One little crack -- just a solid connection between ash and leather, and the series would be over. The chance that was immortal Casey's was now the Babe's. He had the World Series in the hollow of his hand.[57]

The techniques of rhythm and detail were picked up by other announcers and imitated, usually with mixed success. Books purporting to explain the essence of the sportcasting business stressed the announcer's ability to turn the game into a dramatic stage through lively voice and language,[58] and emphasized the need for anecdotes, biographies, and even puns as a way to enliven the game and to avoid disasterous silence on the airwaves.[59]

Whatever McNamee's skills or defects, he set the style for baseball broadcasters as fast-talking entertainers: radio air must never be left untenanted, and that tenant must be dramatic prose.[60] The resulting excesses disgusted veteran pressmen like Ring Lardner,[61] but the distinction between radio announcing and newspaper reporting was recognized even while it was developing. As Stanley Woodward of the Herald Tribune observed: the newspaper reporter was a workman, the radio announcer was a voice.[62]

"GEE WHIZ!" SPORTSWRITING

During the 1920's , Stanley Walker, city editor of the New York Herald Tribune, distinguished two camps among sportswriters: "Gee Whiz!" and "Aw Nuts!" writers.[63] "Gee Whiz!" writers were notable for their enthusiasm and kind words for all events; while the "Aw Nuts!" writers preferred a cynical and critical approach to sports.[64] This distinction of attitudes towards sports coverage permitted Walker to develop a conceptual history of sportswriting in the Twenties: a movement from the lush verbiage of enthusiasm through the disillusionment and debunking of criticism to the precision of straightforward objective reporting[65] -- what Stanley Woodward, sports editor of the Herald Tribune in the Thirties called "On-the-Button" reporting.[66] Although both the protagonist of enthusiasm -- Grantland Rice[67] -- and the protagonist of criticism -- W.O. McGeehan[68] -- were writing for the same paper at the same time,[69] the distinction is useful to maintain. Gee-Whizzers reflected a spirit of growth and ebulliance that bubbled through the early Twenties, while Aw-Nutsers were precursors of the factual posture that would come to characterize the Thirties.

The emergency of "Gee Whiz!" and "Aw Nuts!" centered around New York City in the Twenties. This city, standing at the fountainhead of the nationwide syndication services,[70] attracted a wide

variety of able sportswriters and editors.[71] During the Twenties, Marshall Hunt of the New York News estimated that New York City had 20 newspapers,[72] each with at least three baseball stories every day (including Winter) -- a story each for the Yankees, Giants, and Dodgers.[73] With such a wide range of opportunity, New York City was able to attract the best sportswriters[74] and to have the best sports pages in the United States.[75]

The job of sportswriting itself was also both hospitable and attractive to writing talent. With great latitude in terms of writing style and expression of opinion,[76] sportswriting was often regarded as the best job on the paper,[77] and it attracted writers who were: (1) interested in the sport itself; (2) interested in better pay; (3) interested in a pleasant lifestyle of travel and entertainment; and, (4) interested in greater freedom of expression without the stunting influence of city desk editing.[78]

The opportunity existed because of the rapid growth of sports coverage after the First World War. In an uncited study of a leading newspaper in a typical American town, Baseball Historian Harold Seymour reported[79] that the percentage of total news content devoted to organized sports rose from 4% in 1890 to 16% in 1923. At least the latter figure can be reinforced: in a mail survey of 40 newspaper circulation managers reported in 1934, Stanley Woodward of the New York Herald Tribune stated that 12-15% of

available editorial space in those papers was devoted to sports.[80] Further, an Editor and Publisher study reported to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1928 noted that the New York Herald Tribune, Times, and World showed increases in their amounts of sports coverage during the Twenties, and that their increases outstripped increases in sports coverage throughout the remainder of the country.[81] In short, the 1920's marked a period of growth for sports coverage in the United States, especially in the New York City area.

The competition (in sports coverage) arose through the newspapers' never-ending competition for circulation. Stanley Walker, city editor of the New York Herald Tribune, rated sports second in importance only to general news in his newspaper and he acknowledged that the clientele for sports may have been wider.[82] In a survey of 40 circulation managers, Stanley Woodward, also of the Herald Tribune, reported that sports ranked consistently only behind general news in importance; that it ranked interchangibly with editorial matter; and that it rarely (if ever) ranked worse than third in importance to the newspaper.[83] The exact contribution of sports coverage is difficult to ascertain, but along with increased coverage came increased circulation, and increased circulation was accompanied by increased advertising revenue. National newspaper advertising soared from $275 million in 1915 to $650

million in 1920, then peaked at $860 million in 1929, the year of the Great Crash.[84] Sports coverage, circulation, and advertising revenue were on the upswing during the Twenties, and all were fuel for the bright fires of competition. At least W.P. Beazell of the New York World seemed convinced when he told the 1929 gathering of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE): "...There is no single classification of news that sells more papers than spotts. ..."[85]

Given the growth of sportswriting space and the financing to underwrite that expansion, the enthusiasm that characterized sportswriting in the Twenties was not hard to understand. Mechanically, the factors of time and space were in the sportswriters' favor. Before the advent of night baseball,[86] sportswriters faced considerably less deadline pressure: a story on an afternoon game did not come out until the next morning -- there was time to compose, and to talk to the principals involved.[86] And the Twenties had plenty of space for sportswriting as well: lead stories on major sports events ran interminably -- metropolitan newspapers would devote 4000 words to cover a World Series game.[88] Publishers wanted long stories and paid reporters by space.[89] To avoid having stories cut, crafty reporters would weave the necessary facts through their stories with the delicacy and irreducibility of golden thread in a tapestry.[90]

Paul Gallico of the New York News felt that the atmosphere of available time and space produced a series of writers who were not only experts on baseball, but writing stylists and individualists as well.[91] Gallico distinguished four attributes that were the hallmarks of sportswriting in the 1920's: (1) writers wrote what they saw and felt; (2) used drama and humor in their reports; (3) expanded the language by creating their own words when necessary; and (4) coined nicknames and slogans to add color to their discussions.[92]

Gallico felt that writers were called upon to describe what they saw and felt because in the days before radio and television, they felt they functioned as eyes and ears for the reading public that could not get to the games themselves -- a public that relied on newspapers for the color and excitement of sports.[93] The writers were not retailing facts, they were telling stories.

The writer as storyteller meant writing stories with flair, and writing with flair meant using literary devices like drama and humor. Sportswriters in the Twenties tended to be college men,[94] products of liberal arts rather than journalism schools,[95] and readers of literature, both ancient and modern.[96] Literary expression rather than journalistic convention was more congenial to such backgrounds.

A bent for literary rather than literal expression can also

be used to distinguish the sportswriters of the Twenties: they tended to create new words when necessary. Baseball Historian Ralph Adreano cited lexicographical accounts in American Speech and the American Thesaurus of Slang which indicated that the era from the mid-1920's to the early 1930's was a particularly rich period for the production of new words and phrases.[97] Indeed, a 1937 doctoral dissertation cited by Baseball Historian David Voigt, found roughly 2,500 words that moved from descriptions of baseball games to use in everyday speech.[98]

Although new terms were coined to impart a fresh touch to the otherwise standard terminology imbedded in the vocabulary of the baseball rules,[99] it did not necessarily follow that all sportswriters were always successful. Stanley Woodward of the New York Herald Tribune complained loudly about sportswriters who failed to retail exact information and who even managed to disguise the competitors' identities with a smokescreen of adjectives and nicknames.[100] Stanley Walker, also of the Herald Tribune, ralied loudly against "overblown sagas" and "pasteboard heroes;"[101] and both men joined in outraged disapproval of "bizarre patois"[102] and synthetic jargon that even lacked the authentic ring of American slang for starters, and which constituted an esoteric idiom which only the sportswriters could understand.[103]

Whatever the end product of all this elaborate composition --

whether the best writing of the period (according to Paul Gallico, a writer[104]); or a setback to newspaper writing in general (according to Stanley Woodward, an editor[105]) -- the end product of this style of writing seemed set the tone of sportswriting in general; solidified public interest in sports, particularly baseball; and forced newspaper editors to concede a prominent position to sports in their newspapers.[106] Perhaps the fairest and most accurate assessment of sportswriting in this period was made by Stanley Woodward of the New York Herald Tribune: "... it is my conclusion that sports were never more fluently nor sloppily covered ... ."[107]

Among the more fluent, and possibly the less sloppy, were two New York journalistic giants: Grantland Rice and W.O. McGeehan. Rice and McGeehan were sports columnists; the purpose of their respective "Sportlight" and "Down the Line" columns was to provide an opportunity for personal comment on the sporting scene.[108] As columnists, these two writers worked independently of the sports staff, which retailed the facts of the games; the columnists were called upon to get below the surface of the day's lead story.[109] Getting below the surface meant writing columns of 900-1200 words[110] for 260-365 days of the year.[111] As Stanley Woodward of the Herald Tribune pointed out, columnists were remarkable if they wrote good columns half of the time, and were

passable the rest.[112]

Rice and McGeehan were considered good columnists -- Rice for his rhythm and euphony; McGeehan for his ironic twists that made ordinary sentences interesting.[113] But each writer was also distinguished by his attitude toward sportswriting: Rice was a kindly "Gee Whiz!" writer, while McGeehan was a cynic from the "Aw Nuts!" school.[114] Rice's ebullience was a carryover of the enthusiasm of the Twenties, while McGeehan's skepticism was a precursor of the realism of the Thirties.

Grantland Rice was born in 1880 near Nashville, Tennessee,[115] and, after a bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University[116] and some newspaper experience, he began writing for the New York Evening Mail in 1910.[117] In 1913, Rice moved to the New York Tribune[118] and assumed his position as the dean of the "Gee Whiz!" writers.[119]

The essence of "Gee Whiz!" was summarized by Paul Gallico, another disciple of that school:

> I belonged to the gee-whiz (sic) group of sportswriters. ... I was impressed by athletes, by what I was seeing and also by what I was trying to do. I thought I ought to impress my public, impress the people who were reading, because if I didn't make a game that I saw, and which excited me, if I didn't make that exciting to the reader, I was a lousy sportswriter.[120]

Rice was the epitome of the "Gee Whiz!" school, the standard to which many young writers aspired.[121] Combining lush leads and rich elaboration with all the essential facts,[122] Rice became a popular and respected figure in the sportswriting field,[123] and set an elegant style that was widely copied and seldom achieved.[124] Describing Babe Ruth during the final game of the 1926 World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Yankees, Rice used the techniques that generated his popularity:

> The one Yankee who might have saved the day once more was only given one chance in five times up to show his stuff. The big Babe had his mighty howitzer trained on the right field stands, but Haines and Alexander kept it spiked with a flock of passes. The impotent Babe pawed the muddy ground with his feet and waved his big mace back and forth, but through most of the afternoon he had to look upon wide balls thrown beyond his reach. In the fourth game at St. Louis and his seventh game here his record shows four home runs out of four times up with six free passes, a double record that will last as long as Alexander's arm has defied the passing years.[125]

Rice was an innocent man[126] in an innocent era,[127] and his love for sport and for verse about sport[128] came through in his writing and set the pace for "Gee Whiz!" writing in the Twenties.

"AW NUTS!" JOURNALISM

Not all the sportswriters of the 1920's were caught up in "Gee Whiz!" sportswriting; other journalists looked at "Gee Whiz!" elaborations as "pretty flossy stuff."[129] "Aw Nuts!" sports comumnist W.O. McGeehan did not have Grantland Rice's

national reputation,[130] but he was regarded by at least Al Laney of the New York Herald Tribune as the best sportswriter in the country.[131]

W(illiam) O('Connell) McGeehan was born in San Francisco in 1879, and, after stints with Stanford University, with the U.S. Army, and with various newspapers, came to New York City in 1914.[132] By 1916, McGeehan was sports editor of the New York Tribune; by 1921, he was promoted to managing editor -- the post which he left in 1922 to devote full time to his column "Down the Line."[133]

Although accused of being a sentimentalist at heart,[134] McGeehan's allusions to the finances and politics of sports,[135] his enlightened skepticism,[136] his dry and whimsical humor,[137] and his ability to deflate stuffed shirts with formal language and less formal irony[138] -- all made McGeehan a leading proponent of the realistic school that debunked rather than inflated the mythopoeia of sports reporting: the "Aw Nuts!" school.

In discussing the "Aw Nuts!" school, Stanley Walker of the Herald Tribune noted that this approach rose to the fore while H. L. Mencken was using the debunking approach to comment on life and letters in America.[139] Walker viewed this approach as essentially a way of cutting away the dead wood in sportswriting -- a way in which sports could be treated in proportion to their

importance to the public as a whole.[140] Even the redoubtable Grantland Rice noted the change:

> I believe I cam along in gayer, happier times for both newspaper readers and writers. Somewhere in the late 1920's there was a sudden change. In those earlier days columnists wrote verse and paragraphs. ... Whatever happened, the Peglers and the Winchells, the Brouns and the Ed Sullivans drove off the rhymers and paragraphers from most newspapers to the sorrow of many, many readers.[141]

What the "Gee Whiz!" school inflated with praise, the "Aw Nuts!" school deflated with doubt. Writing in a formal, precise language that eschewed slang and cliches, McGeehan imparted an ironic touch[142] to sportswriting in the 1920's.

> The present collossus of baseball came up from obscurity. When he was a gangling, mischevous boy Goerge Herman Ruth was turned over to an institution maintained by the Christian Brothers at Baltimore. They tried to teach him some useful trade, but he showed no particular interest in anything that might be classed as such. He cared for nothing but baseball. It was decided that he should be taught the trade of cigar making, but is is recorded that he was an indifferent workman. ...
>
> Now, it was about the time that the 'Black Sox' scandal was brewing that Babe Ruth joined the Yankees and was transferred to the outfield. ...
>
> ... He started hitting home runs. There was something really convincing in this gesture, for he was hitting them harder, farther and more frequently than they had ever been hit before. His bat was compared to the club of Hercules and the hammer of Thor. The eccentric left handed pitcher, who might have become an indifferent cigar maker, became the national hero and the biggest news of the day.[143]

The irony was steeped in the realistic appraisal that perhaps sports after all were not the most important and absorbing aspect[144] of American life in the 1920's. Perhaps America was growing up. Perhaps sportswriters were growing up.

The assault on the elaborate prose of "Gee Whiz!" sportswriting came on three fronts -- charges of graft, both financial and emotional; readjustments within newspaper organizations; and, incursions by radio.

Charges of graft hovered around sportswriting ever since its inception: at the turn of the century, ill-paid sportswriters boosted their incomes by doing publicity work for sports owners, promoters, and managers.[145] In 1926, Will Owen Jones of the Nebraska State Journal raised the question of tainted sportswriters at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), but discussion was pretty much squelched.[146] The following year, at the 1927 meeting of ASNE, the same Will Owen Jones reported the results of a poll to which 125 newspapers responded: of those newspapers responding to the question, at least three-quarters reported that the wages of their sports staffs were equal to or greater than the wages paid to other staff members.[147] By the 1930 meeting, the ASNE concluded that sports department ethics had improved, and that the remaining evils could be easily rectified.[148] Although stories of mer-

chandise checks returned and contraband liquor retained still circulated,[149] the New York Daily News took the lead by prohibiting its reporters from receiving any kind of gifts,[150] and by breaking the tradition of having sportswriters' expenses paid by the ballclub they covered.[151]

Emotional graft was of a different order, however. During the 1920's, sportswriters had much more direct contact with the players being covered. Apart from the usual interviewing attendant upon any sporting event, sportswriters often traveled on the same trains with players and coaches.[152] The easy cameraderie of poker, tall tales, and shop talk carried through to both home and visiting ballparks.[153] The rise of the "Aw Nuts!" school, with its penchant for criticism and controversy, soon minimized the emotional form of graft: baseball men dodged criticism by hiding behind cliches and by interviewing only for the sake of free publicity.[154] As Harold Parrott of the Brooklyn Eagle put it -- a "cellophane wall"[155] came down between the baseball men and the sportswriters.

But the cellophane wall was already being set up from another source: the organizational structures of the newspapers themselves. A study of 125 newspapers reported to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1927, pointed out that in over three-quarters of the responding newspapers, the sports

departments edited their own copy and sent it directly to the composing room.[156] This system made the sports department independent of such supervisory forces as the city editor and the managing editor, and allowed it: "... to do things that would not be tolerated on any of the other pages."[157] Sports pages, the report concluded, needed proper supervision, and needed to select its stories more along the lines of news values employed by the paper as a whole.[158] This theme was echoed by Stanley Woodward, sports editor of the New York Herald Tribune:

> ... I have discovered that sportswriting reached its lowest ebb in the years immediately following its isolation by the editor. It became windy, fanciful and full of mixed figures. It developed a jargon of its own which was unitelligible to the average reader. ... If the reporters on the city staff had written as did those of the sports subdivision they would have been thrown out without the benefit of severance pay. ...[159]

Woodward's comment contained the germ of the organizational shifting that changed the composition of sportswriting staffs: greater control of the sports pages by the newspaper's editorial structure and the gradual increase in the number of writers trained at the city desk. As early as 1923, the New York Times -- the bastion of objective reporting in all matters, including sports[160] -- was using a system where beginning writers spent their first two years at the city desk, then moved to sports if an opening arose.[161] Stanley Woodward, following his own advice,

started Herald Tribune writers on the city staff, then assigned them to sports.[162] Further, by 1930, at least at the New York Herald Tribune, sports had become a subdivision of the editorial department, and not an independent entity.[163] By the 1930 meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), Edward S. Beck of the Chicago Tribune was pointing to the arrival of better trained newspapermen on sportswriting staffs and holding forth the hope that the evils of the past could be remedied.[164]

The final pressure towards greater realism and objectivity in sports reporting came from the incursion of radio into the sporting world. Reinforcing Paul Gallico's assertion that prior to the advent of radio, sportswriters attempted to serve as the public's eyes and ears at sporting events,[165] sportswriting long after the advent of radio was composed as if the stories were still breaking the news.[166] However, Stanley Woodward of the New York Herald Tribune noted that journalists were of two minds on this question: one group advocating that morning edition sports stories be written like afternoon sports stories, that is, with the assumption that readers already knew the results; the other group advocating a continuation of the traditional assumption that the morning papers were breaking the news of sporting events to their readers.[167]

Whichever school of thought was prominent on a given newspaper,

the winds of change were beginning to be felt. In 1925, Chicago Cubs' baseball games began to be broadcast on a daily basis.[168] By 1927, rumors were circulating at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) that the Chicago Tribune was experimenting with reports of professional baseball games on a bare news basis.[169] Perhaps the advent of radio and objective sports reporting were coincidental, but they were also contemporaneous.

These three forces -- declining graft, changing organizations, and growing radio -- contributed to the trend toward objective sports reporting. The greatest pressure came, however, from the financial cataclysm of 1929.

DEPRESSION AND CHANGE

The effect of the financial cataclysm of 1929 and the Depression that followed were so widespread and pervasive that the Crash of 1929 became on of the truly major events in American history. The effects of the Crash and Depression on sports-writing in America can be divided into two groups: psychological effects and financial effects.

The primary psychological effect of the Crash was the widespread illusion-smashing that had gathered momentum during the 1920's.[170] The joys and excesses of a period of ebullience gave way to the pressures of a grimmer reality. Following this trend,

sportswriters tended to become more critical of the events they were covering.[171] The illusions and high drama of sports as the stuff of epic poetry began to give way to the hard stares of doubting newsmen, who began to look at real performances instead of looking for incipient heroes.

This aura of skepticism did not spring full grown from the Depression, although its growth could have been aided by the financial disasters that began in 1929. Skepticism as an intellectual stance became particularly fashionable in 1925, when H. L. Mencken assumed the editorship of the American Mercury magazine.[172] Reflecting Mencken's own skepticism, the American Mercury began an influential parade of sophisticated doubt and debunking.[173] Indeed, Grantland Rice, the elder statesman of "Gee Whiz!" sportswriting, after lamenting the passing of versifiers and paragraphers during the period 1925-1930,[174] expressed the opinion that the "... finest group to grace American journalism flourished from 1910-1925."[175] What Rice meant by the passing of the versifiers and paragraphers and by the finest group in journalism was not clear from his memoirs. What was clear was that Rice picked 1925, the year Mencken assumed control of the American Mercury,[176] as the year in which Rice personally perceived a change in the dynamics of American sportswriting.

But psychological effects are difficult to argue: the ephemeral nature of human consciousness and the outright perversity of human thought against organization preclude an easy

analysis of psychological change during the 1920's. An area far easier to explore was the financial effects of the Depression.

Through the 1920's, newspapers were on the financial upswing. High circulation and generous advertising revenues generated both growth and optimism.[177] Financial growth, combined with a steady decline in the cost of newsprint following World War I,[178] permitted newspapers of the 1920's to indulge in the luxuries of an expansive era.

The growth of advertising revenue was particularly important to newspapers. During the 1920's, advertising rose from about two-thirds of a newspaper's revenue during the early part of the decade to about three-fourths of a newspaper's revenue by the time of the Great Crash.[179] This growing dependency on advertising revenue, combined with growth in the total amount of revenue spent by business for advertising,[180] tied newspapers far more tightly to the national economic structure than newspapers had been tied before the 1920's. Such a growing dependency meant increased revenue while the economic situation was booming and while advertising revenue was burgeoning. However, this dependency could have spelled disaster for newspapers when the Crash came in 1929 had it not been for an important quirk of the 1930's: although personal income was threatened on a widespread basis,

newspaper circulation remained relatively stable.[181]

The relative stability of circulation, which only declined from about 39½ million in 1930 to approximately 38 million by 1935,[182] helped newspapers to take up the slack of their advertising losses.[183] Although the newspapers' share of total advertising revenue remained at roughly two-thirds of the total well into the 1930's,[184] the total amount of advertising revenue available fell to levels notably lower than in the golden days of the 1920's.[185]

Radio also nibbled away at newspapers' share of advertising revenues; but even well into the 1930's, radio rarely commanded more than a tenth of advertising revenue; although its share of advertising revenue did show a steady and detectable growth.[186] The newspapers' dominance of advertising gradually eroded and, when the totals of available advertising also slipped, newspapers were left to face a financial squeeze from declining advertising revenue and relatively stable circulation. With available funds declining, the newspapers began a series of survival adaptions.

The most obvious change in the post-Crash newspapers was the drastic reduction in story length.[187] According to George Strickler, of the Chicago Tribune, the economics of getting out a newspaper shriveled up the available space for non-advertising material,[188] and the trend toward narrower columns and larger

type faces shrank available space even farther.[189] As space narrowed, the luxuriant verbiage of the 1920's, popularized by the "Gee Whiz!" school of sportswriting, gradually faded. As George Strickler of the Chicago Tribune noted:

> ... I don't think we'll ever again see a Grantland Rice or a ... Paul Gallico. They couldn't write sports today. ... when you start to trim a Grantland Rice ..., you get down to the straight Associated Press story. You trim out the little touches, the man's nuances. You trim out the man himself. ...[190]

As editing increased in severity, editors discovered that their city staffers could cover the same events in half the space required by the lush writing of the 1920's.[191] As space became scarcer, spartan styles of writing that conveyed the same facts in less space came to the fore.

This trent toward sparser styles was accelerated by the rise in popularity of tabloid newspapers. From an American renascence in 1919, the tabloids had grown to a dozen newspapers by 1930.[192] In general, these tabloids had two distinguishing attributes, both of which were related to the mechanics of getting out a newspaper: (1) decreased copy space for covering news events; and (2) a lively prose style with twin emphases on brevity and simplicity.

The decreased copy space was attributable to the folded in half format of the tabloids, and their propensity for using pictures.[193] Improvements in photography, engraving, and the printing processes

themselves encouraged newspapers in the 1920's to make greater use of pictures in their layouts.[194] Journalism Historian Simon Bessie considered tabloids the greatest influence in this expansion of the use of pictures:[195] by 1930, approximately 40% of non-advertising space in the tabloids was being used for pictures.[196] Encouraged by the successes of the tabloids, eight column (standard format) newspapers increased their own picture use -- by the end of the 1920's, some eight column newspapers were running pictures in as much as 25% of their advertising space.[197] This trend peaked in 1938 when some metropolitan eight column newspapers were using as much as 38% of their available non-advertising space for pictures,[198] a level virtually as high as the level reached by the tabloids in the 1920's.

Given the scarcity of space created in the tabloids by the widespread use of pictures and by the folded in half format, tabloid writing styles were adapted to maximize the use of available space. Writing became terse to conserve space, and lively to retain attention.[199] The traditional summary lead style of newspaper writing was abandoned in favor of brief stories written in the living language of the day.[200] The tabloids began dispensing news as entertainment rather than news as serious matter. The result was spritely, superficial, and eminently readable.

As the dual squeeze of declining advertising revenue and increased use of pictures narrowed non-advertising copy space, eight column newspapers began adapting to meet this shrinkage problem. The adjectival excesses of "Gee Whiz!" writing were pared away, and sportswriting, tempered by the realism of the "Aw Nuts!" outlook, began to strive for the veracity of straight news reporting. Stanley Woodward, sports page editor for the New York Herald Tribune during the 1930's, described this new approach:

> This is the On-the-Button school which attempts straight reporting. It leaves the hooray-hooray business to radio announcers and yet refuses to make a career of sneering. ... it won't strain a fact to make a lead stronger ... nor will they bury prosaic and essential facts in a welter of verbiage calculated to lift the reader into transports of misty grandeur. By reading the story of a good modern sportswriter, you will be able to find out at once which team won, how it won, where it won and what the score was. ...[201]

The excesses of the 1920's, strangled by the constrictions of copy space and attitude, gave way to the economies of the 1930's. The tabloids had shown that interesting writing could be compact writing. The elaborate prose of sportswriting's luxuriant age gave way to the simple language of the 1930's. The sports-writing of the 1920's became newswriting about sports in the 1930's. But the sportswriting of the 1920's left behind a dual legacy, one part of which is widely know, the other part of which is too often overlooked.

The known legacy of 1920's sportswriting was the fostering

and cementing of interest in baseball -- both as a spectator sport and as a topic suitable for media coverage.[202] Sports, especially baseball, grew from an occasional news story to a newspaper section in its own right. The newspaper sports section, newborn at the century's turn, had come into its established adulthood by the 1920's.[203] This maturity encouraged radio, another newborn in the media field, to emulate its elders and to cover baseball as a topic of considerable audience interest. In this effort at imitating its elders, radio began developing techniques that would propel it on its spectacular and headlong flight into media adulthood during the 1930's.[204] With the lessons learned covering live events like baseball, radio began its movement from toy to tool.

The often overlooked legacy of 1920's sportswriting was its contribution to the clarity and precision of American common language.[205] In the process of changing one base hits into singles, two base hits into doubles, and home runs with three men on base into grand slams, sportswriting added a set of terminology to everyday language that was both concise and dramatic.[206] When Depression economics forced sports into smaller copy space, the addition of greater precision to the common language made brevity possible without a concomitant reduction in information or sense: when a shutout was pitched, readers knew that a particular pitcher had not allowed even one run to score during

a nine inning game. The infusion of drama into the common language permitted sportswriters to squeeze the drama of a paragraph into a phrase, and, perhaps more importantly, gave radio broadcasters a broad and lively vocabulary (understood by large numbers of listeners) with which to project the excitement of a baseball game.[207] Baseball rules can cover a one base hit to right field, but only dramatic prose can state whether the single was lined (struck sharply) or blooped (basically following the trajectory of a dying bird). The economy and vitality of 1920's sports language became the material of the spare but lively sportswriting style of the newspapers and of the dramatic and colorful radio prose of the 1930's.

Almost as a side contribution, sportswriting in the 1920's also provided the training ground for some of the more widely known and respected columnists of the 1920's and following decades. Writers the caliber of Ring Lardner, Heywood Broun, Paul Gallico, Damon Runyan, and Westbrook Pegler wrote for the 1920's sports pages and went on to subsequent glory in the field of journalism.[208] Sportswriting provided an opportunity for these talented men to attain recognition and to develop their skills free from the strictures of the editing desk,[209] and can be assumed to have contributed to their emergence as skilled and successful writers.

Within the span of roughly a decade, sportswriting had

flourished as a folk art form and left behind a legacy of spritely language and lively interest that made sports (especially baseball) as much a part of American life as campaign promises. The sports pages in the newspaper had moved from foundling through gaudy adolescence to an established position in the make-up of the Twentieth Century newspaper. Radio had moved from a toy playing at World Series coverage to a business that re-created game events for the benefit of both its listeners and its advertisers. Sports became big business and a national institution of folk culture during the 1920's, and the peregrinations and interactions of both newspapers and radio fostered and benefitted from the rise of baseball as a mass sport. Specific styles and specific writers faded from the scene, but a style of communicating had emerged: entertainment, and specificially entertainment associated with baseball, had become an entrenched and legitimate part of the American mass media experience.

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